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SUBJECT Full Text

SHEILA RAUB WEIDENFELD: Just what is the relationship between the CIA and the press? To what extent does the CIA control the media? Are there secrets that should be kept?

I'm Sheila Raub Weidenfeld, and in one moment we'll be talking about the CIA and the press when Pulitzer Prize-winner Sy Hersh of the New York Times; Washington bureau chief Jack Nelson of the Los Angeles Times; Philip Geyelin, editorial page director of the Washington Post; and William Colby, former Director of the CIA join me On the Record.

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WEIDENFELD: Okay, I have a question for everybody.

Jack, just one second.

How valid is Carl Bernstein's contention that over 400, or approximately 400 members of the press worked, over the past 25 years, for the CIA?

WILLIAM COLBY: It's nonsense.

WEIDENFELD: It's nonsense?

COLBY: He destroys at least one of the 400 in his own account, where he says that Joe Alsop was talking to Des Fitzgerald, and Des said, "Why don't you go over to the Philippines to cover an election?" And Joe decided to go. But is that working for CIA?

WEIDENFELD: Well, now, are you saying that Joe Alsop was

not?

PHILIP GEYELIN: Well, that's the weakness of the whole thing. It's 400 apples and oranges and pears and grapefruits. It ranges all the way from people who had casual conversations with CIA officials and sources to people he claims were on the payroll; and you can't lump all that. I mean you can reach 400 if you lump all that together, but it's a meaningless total, I think.

COLBY: Absolutely.

We certainly have used the press. There's no question about it. But the number is very much smaller than...

WEIDENFELD: You were used, Jack. Sy, even you were used in...

COLBY: No, no, no. That's a totally different thing.

WEIDENFELD: Well, that's -- all right. We'll get into that in a second.

SEYMOUR HERSH: But you certainly have had contact with thousands of reporters.

COLBY: I used to run officers who were under journalist cover in my younger days, sure. And I had only one rule: that I had nothing to say about what they submitted to their editors, their American editors. They did favors for me, they did jobs for me overseas, but they wrote to their editor was between him and the editor. That's just a rule that we had.

JACK NELSON: Do you look back on that, though, now as something you just as soon not have done?

COLBY: No, I don't see -- as long as the government is not writing what the American people read in the newspapers, I think...

GEYELIN: You don't think it compromises a reporter to be on the government payroll?

COLBY: Not particularly. These are mostly stringers and free-lancers, and so forth. So in that sense, no. But in some cases they were staff people, in those days.

NELSON: Anybody from the Los Angeles Times?

COLBY: No, I don't think there were any, and I'm not going to talk about particular...

NELSON: I've been asked to ask you that, you know.

HERSH: Is it impossible that it's 400? I don't know. It could be.

COLBY: Oh, I'm pretty sure that's -- I mean if you throw in all the apples and oranges and if you add every newsman who ever talked to a CIA station chief in a foreign country, then you'd probably get 800, 1000.

HERSH: Did you get clearances on people that would just come in casually and talk?

COLBY: No.

HERSH: You didn't get clearance without their knowledge?

COLBY: Not really. Some that you had some particular reason for having a clearance on 'em, you'd get a clearance on 'em. But I don't think the 400 is set at that level.

NELSON: I don't think, incidentally, many journalists would agree with you that that isn't a real corrupting influence,...

COLBY: Well, I know that, but...

NELSON: ...to have journalists actually serve with the CIA.

COLBY: ...I happen to know a lot of very democratic countries where there's a very close relationship between their journalism and their intelligence services. And it certainly hasn't affected the independence and democracy of those countries. And I'm not going to identify them, but nonetheless.

GEYELIN: Without naming names, that charge has been made about the British Government, and there are an awful lot of British newspapermen who feel very uncomfortable about those allegations, that are not precise, not specific. You know, if there are three of them, it compromises all of them.

COLBY: Well, if you're talking about compromising the press, then I think -- let's look at an example of one that we haven't compromised: the Peace Corps. From the very earliest days of the Peace Corps, it was agreed that CIA would have absolutely nothing to do with the Peace Corps. Now, has that protected the Peace Corps against being expelled from countries for intelligence activity? No.

NELSON: No, but it has protected the integrity of the Peace Corps. I'd have to say that.

WEIDENFELD: As opposed to the integrity of the journalists. Because I really want to get back to the problem of the journalists.

COLBY: I don't think the journalists are all that -- have that degree of lack of integrity, frankly.

WEIDENFELD: Mr. Colby, what was the reason that you wanted to use the journalists in the first place? I'm not even going to go back to yesterday; I'm want to go back, you know, with today. First of all, how many journalists do you think are working with the CIA today?

COLBY: Today? No. George Bush put out an order that nobody accredited by an American media outlet would be used. And I'm sure that's the rule today.

GEYELIN: Does that include stringers?

COLBY: Yes, accredited by. If they have an accreditation and...

WEIDENFELD: Well, let's talk about a different form of being used.

Jack, you have to feel like a patsy for the CIA, not having run that story, the Glomar Explorer story.

COLBY: I don't think he's a patsy at all.

NELSON: I don't feel like a patsy, because I did everything I could to try to develop the story. And I had -- it came down to a situation with the Los Angeles Times that either I acquiesce to the editor's decision not to run the Glomar Explorer or I look for other employment. I mean it wasn't put that way to me, but I certainly knew that that was his decision. So I had to go along with his decision.

Now, I recommended that we run the story, and I frankly thought we should have run it. And Mr. Colby will tell you that. The fact is, I told Mr. Colby at the time, I said, "There's no way you can keep this story from breaking out."

And he said, "Well, we're going to do our best." And he said he'd already talked to Bill Thomas, the editor, and he talked to various other people, and he did keep it from breaking out for a while. But I knew he couldn't. To begin with, I knew Seymour Hersh was working on it and I knew he'd been working on it for along time, and I knew he wasn't going to sit still and...

WEIDENFELD: But knowing what you know today, Sy, and then Mr. Colby come to you and said, "Don't run that, for national security reasons," the same thing, knowing what you know today, would you have run that story? Is it a story of national security?

HERSH: Oh, I'll tell you -- Jack raised the question

about what a reporter can do when his editors say, "We're not going to run something." And the obvious option is to resign.

I never even considered resigning over the Glomar Explorer story because I thought it was a laugh riot. I thought it was Katzenjammer Kids. You know, like Tom Lira's (?) great song about Wernher Von Braun, "You aim for the moon but you often hit London." You know, they aimed for a sub and picked up a lot of bodies. And to me was it (A) a national security issue, but basically what it was was something that wasn't even important enough to quit over. Basically...

NELSON: Well, it certainly wasn't important enough to quit over. There's no question about that. And obviously, I never gave that any consideration. I didn't think it was tha important.

I did think it was important to get the story out because I didn't see it as a national security matter.

WEIDENFELD: Well, I guess we have to ask Mr. Colby, don't we?

NELSON: Well, he said it was a national security...

COLBY: Well, I don't use the word national security. I say that this was an immensely valuable, potential, intelligence thing, that we almost had it one year, that we had fixed up the gimmicks and the incredible technology, and it was absolutely certain that we were going to get the rest of the target next year.

Now, I'm under certain constraints as to what I can officially say about this, but let me just ask you a hypothetical: How much would it be worth to the United States to have a Soviet submarine with nuclear missiles which has as its operational station a few hundred miles off the West Coast, with the communications structure which allows them to keep in secret communication with their headquarters and the command-and-control machinery for the launching of those missiles in time of war, all of which might give us -- might give us the chance to work into that system, interfere with the command-and-control system at a critical period in our history? Now, is that worth a lot?

HERSH: Well, there's a lot of questions, there's a lot of other nuances to that.

First of all, you know that submarines aren't really what you'd call the prime deterrent. They're not the first of the time-urgent targets, which is the word they use inside the government. Submarines aren't targeted on the prime targets. If you could break into the land missiles, you might be in better shape in terms of...

COLBY: Well, it's a little hard to get them out in the Pacific.

HERSH: Well, but you're not really buying that much with it, you know. You're buying it for...

COLBY: You are, sir. If I were a Russian, I would give a great deal for one of our Polaris submarines.

HERSH: Look, if you want to put it on and take it down Fifth Avenue and parade it around, you know, so you can say, "Hey, look what we can do," maybe you can, you know, a little public good will and...

COLBY: That has nothing to do with it. I'm talking about the secret information.

GEYELIN: Let's stipulate that it was as important to you as you say it was. Did you really think you could bottle up that story?

COLBY: I didn't know whether I could or not. I was going to give a try. My position was that I really didn't care how many Americans knew about it if the foreigners didn't.

GEYELIN: Well, doesn't it worry you...

COLBY: ... might just be able to hold the thing through the following summer, which would enable us to run the operation.

GEYELIN: Doesn't it worry you to try this kind of thing when the odds are so hopelessly against it? I mean that's a well you can't go to too many times. I don't even think the Director of CIA has any right to do it at all. I think if that kind of a pitch is going to be made by the government, it should be made by the President, who has to keep...

COLBY: In one case I got the...

GEYELIN: ...in mind the sort of First Amendment considerations...

WEIDENFELD: You know, I think...

[Confusion of voices]

WEIDENFELD: For the sake of the public, let us -- that may not be as familiar with this Glomar, briefly, just say what the Glomar Explorer story was.

HERSH: Well, it wasn't a story for a long time. It simply was an attempt -- by the way, there's still a great debate over

whether you were successful or not. For some reason, people want to believe you got it all. They want to believe in great mystery. I noticed in the Washington Post today Charley Seib's column.

The fact is you didn't get what you wanted the first time and you had to go back the second time. It was simply an attempt -- it was a great technological feat, no question about it. They were going to go 3000 feet down.

COLBY: No. More.

HERSH: I mean 15,000 feet down, I guess, or roughly, and to pick up a Soviet submarine from the bottom that had been lost when, in '68, '69?

NELSON: But a key element in it was that it was a Howard Hughes operation. And I think this was one of the things that really turned the reporters on to it, because Howard Hughes is a man who's had all these complex relationships with the CIA in the past and the government in the past, and he's operated sort of on the fringes of the law, or he did for years and years; and people wondered what was happening to the government money. I mean this was a $200-and-some-million project, and it was a legitimate inquiry by newspapers to find out what was happening to the taxpayers' money there. Was it Howard Hughes' ship? Did the government giv him the ship? You know.

COLBY: Well, let's get one thing very clear, that the effort to get the newspapers not to run it was an appeal to them not to run it. There was never any threat of legal action against them, because I really didn't think that was the way to do it. The way to do it was to explain enough of the project, a minimum amount of the project, to show its importance, and then ask the leadership of the journals not to run it. And most of them agreed.

WEIDENFELD: Was our national security endangered when the story came out? Was it worth your efforts going to the editors and publishers around the country?

COLBY: Well, it certainly was. If I'd been able to get throught the summer without its leaking, I would have had the rest of the objective.

WEIDENFELD: We've got to go to a commercial break. What is it?

NELSON: Well, it'll take me longer than...

WEIDENFELD: Okay, because I don't -- we still don't know the answer to that whole story. Has everything been recovered? We still don't know whether the submarine...

COLBY: I'm not able...

NELSON: He's not even going to tell you that.

[Confusion of voices]

HERSH: The Russians did not attack San Francisco the day after we ran that story, did they?

WEIDENFELD: So you're saying...

HERSH: Where's the national security?

COLBY: Well, that really -- if that's the new definition of national security, it's rather an extreme one.

WEIDENFELD: We'll be right back.

* * *

WEIDENFELD: Well, Jack, this whole story with the Glomar Explorer started with the L.A. Times.

NELSON: Well, it surfaced -- yes, it surfaced publicly first because of a burglary out in Los Angeles, and the story was -- started out on page one, and the CIA heard about it and they called the editor, Bill Thomas, and they said, you know, "This is a very sensitive matter. We want to talk to you about it."

And he said, "Well, the presses are already running. The paper is being distributed."

So they did persuade him to move the story inside, so it wouldn't be given so much attention.

After that, of course, a number of papers were already working on it. And Mr. Colby -- I know he briefed me and the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times and he briefed several other people in Washington who began to get onto the story. And before you knew it, you know, Time magazine, Newsweek, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Star, CBS, NBC, PBS, Public Broadcasting, everybody was on it. Even 60 Minutes had heard about it and was ready to do a story about Mr. Colby getting all the rest of the outlets to bottle up the story.

So, it was obvious that he couldn't...

WEIDENFELD: But it was Jack Anderson who finally broke the story.

NELSON: Well, that's right.

WEIDENFELD: Is he disloyal?

COLBY: No. No. I argued with him up till ten minutes before he was on the air.

[Confusion of voices]

COLBY: But his line was the same that these gentlemen are saying, that it was so broadly known at that point that it was going to burst and he wasn't going to -- he wanted to be the first.

GEYELIN: ...people who didn't know it. And then you were asking them to make a judgment, which would obviously involve their consulting with other people who didn't know it.

COLBY: The only reason I went to any...

GEYELIN: You were spreading the story.

COLBY: ...media outlet was that I'd heard a story that they were on the story. That -- I never went to anybody unless I had information that they were on story.

NELSON: And The Post wasn't even on it.

GEYELIN: We weren't on it, I don't think.

NELSON: And another interesting thing about it was...

GEYELIN: We got on it. We got on it very quickly...

NELSON: ...you didn't mind if the Americans knew about it, but you didn't want the Russians to know about it. Well, certainly the Russians must have known about that first story that we ran in Los Angeles.

COLBY: Not necessarily. In that case...

NELSON: The Russian intelligence couldn't be that bad. It ran on page one in one edition and inside the others.

COLBY: That was at a time when there was every kind of fanciful story around about CIA. One little story like that -- we went through the revelation of the Japanese code in World War II, and the Japanese Government never found that out, in a front-page big story in the Chicago Tribune. They never discovered it.

Now, again, I didn't say I was going to win, but I was going to try as hard as I could.

NELSON: One thing about it, though, Mr. Colby is when

the story did break, the CIA looked awfully good in it.

COLBY: That really had nothing to do with it. I mean...

NELSON: But it did.

COLBY: If that had been my motive...

NELSON: Well, I'm not saying -- I'm just saying that he briefed everybody.

COLBY: If that had been my motive, I really wouldn't have asked them not to run it. I would have just tried to get it...

WEIDENFELD: But I have a question. Is this the first time that you had ever gone to the publishers and editors around, and to reporters, and said, "This is too important. Don't run it"?

COLBY: No, I'd been to others for some -- and I've noticed that the real touchstone of the case is that if you're talking about something in the past, they won't pay any attention to you. And I understand that. But if you talk about something that is still going on and you can tell them that it really is valuable, it's self-evident that it is valuable, then they will change it slightly.

NELSON: By the way, Mr. Colby, I think you were saying, too, earlier that you think that the whole Glomar Explorer story now should be told, and you try to tell it in the book that you're doing, but...

COLBY: I think at this time -- the reason the government has said nothing on it is because of the diplomatic implications, and that stems from a set of recommendations I made, that we not say anything after thing came out, because there's a position in international diplomacy that you don't push a fellow into a corner and make him react.

Now, there has been no international incident over this case. I think that was the right policy at the time.

Now, obviously, as time goes by, the requirements on that are less than they were at the initial moments, and I think that in due time -- and I would push it forward rather than backward -- that the details should come out, and that they would indeed make the CIA look good.

WEIDENFELD: Well, since we don't know what they are right now...

HERSH: Let me interject one thing, though. Isn't it true that there was a little bit of tension between the Glomar Explorer crew and a Soviet trawler? Wasn't there a little...

COLBY: Again, I'm not really allowed to talk about this.

HERSH: There was a very bad scene out there, Bill, that nobody's written about yet.

COLBY: But?

[Confusion of voices]

COLBY: I am convinced, however, and there is good evidence for my belief, that foreigners did not know...

HERSH: That stuff going to be in your book?

COLBY: I am under certain restraints in this conversation and in my book. And of all the people in the world, I have to abide by the secrecy agreement I made with CIA.

WEIDENFELD: Are you sitting on any stories, Sy?

HERSH: A million stories you sit on, because you think, "What's the difference?" you know. A headline today. Who cares? Seriously.

NELSON: Well, you're not withholding it. You're sitting on it because...

WEIDENFELD: I want to get back to the journalists. A lot of this has to do with the three of you and what you think of the CIA. I mean is the CIA an institution that you honor today? I mean do you think -- how do you treat the CIA? Does it deserve respect, do you think?

HERSH: You're asking that on public television? Are you kidding?

WEIDENFELD: Well, I'm going to ask Phil, because, Phil, you know the CIA better than most people do the CIA.

GEYELIN: If what you're asking me is did I work for it once, the answer is I did, for 11 months in 1951, and I quit because I didn't like the line of work.

WEIDENFELD: Was it the line of work or was it the institution, as it was set up?

GEYELIN: It's so cellular that I couldn't see the institution. I only saw what I was being asked to do.

WEIDENFELD: Which was what, Phil?

GEYELIN: Well, I'm not going to talk about it, because I

took the same secrecy oath that -- it's not important. You can read all about it in the Saturday Evening Post in the piece by Tom Braden if you're really that interested. But it was -- that was the CIA 25 years ago. I don't know what it's like today.

WEIDENFELD: But you know the institution.

GEYELIN: I respected a lot of people who I met there. I knew, after I got out, a lot of them as news sources, and I respected a lot of them. I think it's done terrific work, in some ways, and it's had a very bad passage, in my opinion. But what it's like today, I don't know. They don't tell us. That's one of the problems.

WEIDENFELD: Well, let's talk about it today when we get back in just a moment.

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WEIDENFELD: Well, now, what should be mentioned?

NELSON: Well, the fact that, you know, here's a guy who was in the CIA for 11 months in 1951?

GEYELIN: Yes.

NELSON: And, you know, people still say there's a nest of CIA people over there at The Post. Phil Geyelin, hell, you know, the head of the editorial page of the Washington Post, he used to be in the CIA. And it's a hard thing for people to sort of...

WEIDENFELD: That's the Carl Bernstein thing. It's the witch hunt that you're afraid of, I suppose, isn't it?

COLBY: Well, it is, very much so. It's a kind of a McCarthyism in reverse.

NELSON: Yes. And also, you know, it isn't fair, I don't think, to say that, you know, 400 people and so forth, when you're talking about a lot of people who -- I mean I'm sure Seymour Hersh has cooperated with the CIA when he found out something. He probably, maybe, has told them what he found out in return for them telling him something he found out.

HERSH: That's what all reporters...

NELSON: That's right. I mean I do that. I do...

GEYELIN: There's another thing about it. If you've ever worked for the CIA, they never stop trying to re-recruit you, I think. I mean that certainly has been -- was my experience. I

mean there were all kinds of propositions. And I'm soon newspaper guys -- most foreign correspondents have probably been approached in one way or another.

WEIDENFELD: For example? Even recently, would you say?

GEYELIN: Well, I'll give you an example. I was in Paris once and I wanted to go to Warsaw, so I went and checked in with the embassy people there, including the CIA, and asked them, you know, who's big in Warsaw and who should I talk to and what's the big story in Poland right now. I figured the CIA would have some idea.

Well, I found out later that they cabled back to Washington and suggested maybe I could do some errands for them while I was there. But nothing came of it. I never heard about it again, but I've seen my files, so I know it's there.

It sounds as if I was working for them. As it turned out, something happened in the Middle East and I never went to Poland.

But they do that a lot. And I think they probably -- you know, in that 400 that Carl is talking about, there are probably people who were on the payroll, people who were doing errands, and, I don't know.

NELSON: But I must say that I really do think that the use of journalists as CIA officers, whether they're part-time journalists or fulltime journalists, is a really bad practice. Because I think it -- I think that it certainly gives the appearance of the corrupting of journalists, if it didn't actually corrupt them, and...

COLBY: Oh, I think that's...

NELSON: I'll tell you something else, though. It does endanger -- it endangers the whole relationship of the press and government.

COLBY: Do you mind if we use a TASS correspondent?

NELSON: Well, if you can get a TASS correspondent...

HERSH: I can't understand any journalist even volunteering to help the CIA.

GEYELIN: Well, a TASS correspondent isn't a correspondent. So we're not talking...

NELSON: What you're essentially saying is that because the Russians do that...

COLBY: No, no, no.

NELSON: They use a TASS correspondent maybe as a KGB. But I don't think that we ought to do that. We've got a different kind of press.

COLBY: Well, that's exactly what the rules are today: that CIA is not using anybody who's accredited by an American journal.

NELSON: But I'm just saying they never should have.

COLBY: And there it is.

WEIDENFELD: Do you think that the CIA Director should be above the law?

COLBY: Above the law?

WEIDENFELD: Uh-huh.

COLBY: Of course not.

WEIDENFELD: Of course -- well, all right...

NELSON: How about Richard Helms?

WEIDENFELD: How about Richard...

COLBY: I don't think he violated the law.

GEYELIN: You don't think he did.

HERSH: You don't think he what?

NELSON: If he lied under oath to a committee...

COLBY: I don't think he did.

NELSON: You don't think he did lie.

COLBY: The Supreme Court has set out some very clear guidelines on what that kind of a crime would be, and I don't think he committed...

NELSON: Now, that subcommittee...

HERSH: That's a very strange position, Mr. Colby, with all due respect. I mean I don't think there's any question he lied. There's a question of whether or not you want to go after him for...

COLBY: If you read the exact script very carefully, you'll find that it is not clear enough to meet the Supreme Court's...

HERSH: I'm here to tell you that people in the Justice Department who invested [sic] that case, the lower echelon, are convinced they have a case, a perjury case. They're not convinced it's going to be prosecuted, because there's an awful lot of discretion, and far better cases have been dropped, I've been told by people. But the people involved...

GEYELIN: Well, are we going to indict him on this show? I mean...

COLBY: I just don't think he's indictable.

[Confusion of voices]

NELSON: No, but what Seymour said has essentially been written in the press: that there are people in the Justice Department who say that they have a case. But whether it'll be prosecuted or not, who knows? And there was a subcommittee, was there not, that recommended he be prosecuted?

COLBY: No. There was a staff report to a subcommittee. The staff report was rejected by the committee.

HERSH: You don't think he should be indicted.

COLBY: No, I don't.

HERSH: And you don't think he lied.

COLBY: No.

WEIDENFELD: Well, I guess time will tell. And we only have 15 seconds, and I have to ask you, because I think the CIA has changed so much. Would you join the CIA today, or is it just in terrible shambles...

GEYELIN: Well, I wouldn't join it today, but I don't know that it's in shambles or not. But I wouldn't join it today, for the same reasons that I left it 25 years ago.

WEIDENFELD: Because, again?

GEYELIN: Because I didn't like what I was doing.

NELSON: I'd appreciate all the help and information I could get from them.

COLBY: Well, I think a lot of the information of CIA ought to be made available to the public.